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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001902

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DEPARTMENT FOR D, SA, SA/INS, S/CT, DS/DSS/ITA,
DS/IP/NEA/SA; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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SUBJECT: Provoking political crisis, President fires
three key ministers and suspends Parliament

Refs: (A) Colombo-Ops Center 11/04/2003 telecons

- (B) Colombo 1893, and previous

(U) Classified by Charge' d'Affaires James F. Entwistle.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In a sudden move, President Kumaratunga has fired the ministers of defense, interior, and mass communications citing concerns over the "deterioration of the security situation." Late in the day, the President also suspended Parliament until November 19. The PM is in Washington and his office just sent us a statement strongly opposing her moves. Colombo appears quiet as of late November 4. The President's action highlights her volatility and sets the table for a serious political crisis with unknown implications for the peace process. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) PRESIDENT FIRES MINISTERS: In a sudden announcement made mid-day November 4 while Prime Minister Wickremesinghe was in Washington, President Kumaratunga sacked the ministers of defense, interior, and mass communications. The President also fired the secretaries (second-in-commands) in the ministries of

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defense and mass communications, but spared the secretary of the interior ministry. In a conversation

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with the Charge', Harim Peiris, press spokesman for the President, confirmed reports that the President would personally take over the three ministerial portfolios left vacant by the firings. Peiris, who has been named by the President to be the new Secretary in the Mass Communications Ministry, added that the ministers in question could retain other portfolios that they had had, e.g., John Amaratunga of the Interior Ministry was still the Minister of Christian Affairs.

3. (C) SUSPENSION OF PARLIAMENT: Late in the day, the President also suspended Parliament until November 19. Harim Peiris told the Charge' that rumors that the President planned to declare a "State of Emergency" were not true.

4. (C) PRESIDENT'S RATIONALE VAGUE: The President's rationale for the sudden firing of the ministers was vague. In a brief written statement announcing her move, the President's Office commented: "This step has been taken after careful consideration, in order to prevent further deterioration of the security situation in the country. The reasons for this action will be made known to the public in due course." Dr. Sarath Amunugama, a senior MP in the President's People Alliance (PA) party, told Pol FSN that the President will issue a more detailed statement and perhaps go on television late November 4 to explain her move. We later heard that she might make a statement as late as November 5.

5. (C) PM'S STATEMENT: The UNP government appears to have been caught completely off guard by the President's sudden move, although there has been speculation that the President might "try something" in conjunction with the mid-November budget debate in Parliament (see Ref B). For much of the day, there was no reaction by the government to her move. Late November 4, however, Mission received the following statement on official stationery in the name of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, who is in Washington, rejecting the President's move:

Begin text:

Prime Minister's Office

Whilst being out of the country on an important visit to the United States, a co-chair of the donor community, in

furtherance of Sri Lanka's peace process and economic development, I have learnt that the President, Her Excellency Chandrika Kumaratunaga has precipitated a national crisis in an attempt to subvert the mandate given to my government by the people on December 5, 2001 and reinforced in March 2002 at the local authority elections.

Your government will not be deviated from the mandate given it by the people to pursue the path of peace, security and economic prosperity due to the irresponsible and precipitous actions of the President aimed at plunging the country into chaos and anarchy.

I pledge to you the people, your government will not allow this desperate and irresponsible attempt to undermine the peace process and economic prosperity of the people to succeed.

I remain resolute in implementing the mandate of the people for peace, democracy and prosperity with the fullest support and continued confidence of the international community.

It is blatantly obvious that these opportunistic actions are timed to deprive the people of the economic and social benefits that they are on the verge of reaping as a result of the solid foundations laid by your government over the last two years.

Be rest assured I will continue my mission for the people undeterred and conclude my crucial program in Washington D.C., including the meeting with president George W. Bush, which is part of the ongoing process of consolidating the peace, unity and economic prosperity of all our people.

I therefore call upon all of you, the people, the armed forces, police and public service to remain calm and vigilant in the face of this deliberate attempt of endanger the peace process which we will together overcome.

04th November 2003

End text.

16. (C) OBSERVERS PREDICT "COHABITATION WARFARE": In discussions with polchief, two well-informed observers of the local political scene said they thought the President probably has the right to fire the ministers per the Sri Lankan Constitution. Kethesh Loganathan, an analyst at the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA), a local think-tank, said the Constitution is written in such a way that almost all executive powers reside in the hands of the presidency, including membership in the Cabinet. In any case, he noted, the President would probably win if the issue is brought to the courts because the Supreme Court and especially Chief Justice Sarath Silva are allies of the PA and would probably back her. All that said, Loganathan predicted that the President's action would spark "bitter cohabitation warfare" because "the UNP will not take this lying down." Jehan Perera, the media director at the National Peace Council, another local think-tank, agreed, remarking that the UNP might be so angry as to take the matter to the streets.

17. (SBU) COLOMBO QUIET: Colombo appears quiet and normal as of late November 4. RSO continues to monitor the situation. Reportedly on the orders of the President, the military has deployed around the headquarters of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) and the government's printing press. We see no need for a change to our consular travel advisory at this point. The DATT is in touch with military counterparts regarding the implications of the defense ministry changes on a number of U.S. military cooperation activities under way at the moment.

18. (C) COMMENT: The President's action highlights her increasing volatility. As reported (see Ref B), her recent track record has involved lashing out routinely at the PM and other targets of her displeasure. While her previous outbursts were mere darts aimed at the GSL, this latest step, unfortunately, sets the table for a serious political crisis and seems timed to ensure maximum embarrassment for the PM in Washington on the eve of his Oval Office meeting. It is not clear where the epicenter of the crisis will be, but it seems that the UNP might well take steps to try to impeach the President and perhaps the Chief Justice (when Parliament comes back into session). The UNP also appears to have a significant amount of popular support due to its peace process initiative and it could well bring out its supporters in protest. Given the swirl of events, fresh

elections are also possible. The PM's statement above indicates that his government plans to fight back hard.

19. (C) COMMENT (Continued): Implications for the peace process and the planned restart of talks focused on the Tigers' just released counterproposals are unknown. For their part, the Tigers are very aware of what is happening: their website, "TamilNet," is posting regular updates on the situation in Colombo. In the past, the group has cited concerns about the situation in the south as a reason for not moving forward along the peace track. END COMMENT.

110. (U) Minimize considered.

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